ABOUT DON QUIXOTE BALLET

In staging Don Quixote, originally for the Bolshoi Theatre in Moscow in 1869, then in a grander St Petersburg production two years later, Petipa followed in a long tradition of Don Quixote productions staged in leading theatres across Europe, the first of which dates to 1740. None of these earlier works survives. And like many ballets from the 19th-century European repertory (Giselle, Le Corsaire and Esmeralda, to name only a few), the spirit, if not the substance, of these Western European Don Quixote ballets remained alive in Russia long after earlier versions disappeared from the stage elsewhere. Even in Russia, three productions proceeded Petipa’s own. Choreographers commonly copied or adapted the works of other dance-makers, and popular plots circulated widely.

Ironically, the ballet we speak of as “Petipa’s” Don Quixote is not quite his. Much as Petipa repurposed the ballets of other choreographers, budding ballet master Aleksandr Gorsky staged his revision of the Petipa work in Moscow in 1900. Influenced by the naturalist acting style that Konstantin Stanislavsky was developing in Moscow, Gorsky encouraged his dancers, including the corps de ballet, to examine their characters’ motivations. In his enthusiasm to break with “old” ballet convention, Gorsky sought to integrate the Petipa divertissements into the fabric of the drama. Though shocking for their time, Gorsky’s innovations and interpolations now seem very much in keeping with the style and structure of the “old” Petipa ballet. The ballet still follows the main lines of a Petipa work, with its deployment of the plot in the first act, the vision scene for the female corps de ballet and soloists – where men trespass only in their dreams – and, finally, a marriage celebration. Faithful to Petipa’s desire to create the corps de ballet, to examine their characters’ motivations. In his enthusiasm to break with “old” ballet convention, Gorsky sought to integrate the Petipa divertissements into the fabric of the drama. Though shocking for their time, Gorsky’s innovations and interpolations now seem very much in keeping with the style and structure of the “old” Petipa ballet.

The Story

Don Quixote is obsessed with stories of medieval chivalry. He tells his servant Sancho Panza that he has decided to become a knight errant and improvises a suit of armor.

In a marketplace in Barcelona, Kitri is forced by her father Lorenzo, an innkeeper, to accept the offer of marriage from the rich Gamache and turn away Basil, the man she loves. Don Quixote arrives at the inn on Rosinante, his horse. He believes he recognizes in Kitri his “loved and idealized” lady Dulcinea.

Don Quixote challenges Gamache to a duel but is mocked and chased away. He is entertained by Lorenzo, and matadors dance with their leader Espada, who is charmed by the street dancer Mercedes. Don Quixote envisions Kitri as his Dulcinea, but Kitri tricks him and runs off with her love, Basil.

In Act 2, Don Quixote is among the windmills and the gypsies. He pays homage to the Gypsy King but the gypsies mock him. Afterwards, he attacks the marionettes of a traveling puppet show as if they were enemy soldiers, and, taking the windmills to be hostile giants, charges at them.

After being wounded in “combat,” Don Quixote retires to the woods to rest, where he falls asleep with Sancho. While asleep, Don Quixote dreams that he is in Dulcinea’s garden, which is inhabited by fantastic beings. But then the dream fades away.

In the last act, everyone is celebrating in the tavern, with Basil, Kitri, Espada and Kitri’s friends. Lorenzo enters and Basil fakes suicide and asks him, with his “dying breath” for his daughter’s hand in marriage. Thinking Basil is dying, he agrees, at which point Basil stops pretending to die and is happily reunited with Kitri. The final scene is the glorification of Kitri and Basil, and Don Quixote, happy for the young lovers, rides into the sunset seeking further journeys.

Above: Anna Pavlova & Laurent Novikoff, in Don Quixoate, Russia, 1924, Condé Nast
Right: Julia Cinquemani & Ulrik Birkkjær in Don Quixote; Photo: Reed Hutchinson; Photocomposition: Catherine Kanner
Text sources: The Royal Ballet, Tim Scholl Writer & Dance Historian and the-ballet.com